

**Lovibond, Sabina, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1983, pp. 238, \$50.**

Ms Lovibond purports to be a defender of moral realism. Non-cognitivists are wrong. Moral judgments are not only propositions - they can be true. But this does not entail any naive commitment to real values of a quasi-Moorean cast (still less to any crude program of reductive naturalism). That would be as vulgar an error as believing in a world of mind-independent objects to which true non-moral propositions correspond. 'The modern period of our intellectual history' begins with the 'discovery' that "the world text' is (at least partly ...) *written by ourselves*." (p. 113). The non-cognitivists proposed a split between the expressive and representative functions of language. Moral judgments, despite their propositional form had to be consigned to the expressive basket because they did not seem to be backed by the right kind of reality. This dichotomy is dissolved within a 'Wittgensteinian' conception of language 'free from invidious comparisons between different regions of discourse' (page 25). All language is grounded in language-games, founded in shared practices. All propositions therefore (!) are expressive - though expressive of what is not entirely clear. Presumably by using words we express our commitment to those practices, whilst the words we use and pay heed to, like the moral judgments of the emotivist, determine our actions. Meanwhile the distinctive deficiency of moral judgments - the absence of an answering reality - is wiped away by the realization that reality is the product of the language-game, and hence that moral judgments have as good a claim to represent reality as any other propositions (pp. 25-26). Truth in ethics, as elsewhere, consists in 'conformity to the consensual standards of sound judgment'. This is not to say that truth or objectivity *mean* intersubjectivity. Rather 'materially speaking there is nothing else for [them] to be'. (p. 42) They are both internal to language games. So too is rationality. To be accounted as a 'soul', that is, as a rational being, you must go along with the herd or the 'intellectual authorities' who direct it. There must be 'agreement in judgments'. Nor can you be rationally convinced of these judgments since subscribing to the judgments is a precondition of rationality. You believe *or else*. Lovibond is very severe with Mill-inspired initiates who interrupt their teachers with unseasonable doubts and questions (pp. 105-106) and endorses Wittgenstein's 'bullying tone' to such arational recalcitrants (p. 56). Indeed, her thought seems to be: I am bullied, therefore I am. Now, the puzzle is why all this should be passed off as *realism*. It seems much more like collective subjectivism, and *global* collective subjectivism at that since it is not confined to morals. For Lovibond (following McDowell and ultimately Dummett) the 'defining thesis of realism' is verification transcendence (p. 69). And according to Lovibond, moral judgments transcend the verificatory powers of the individual if not the collective (pp. 69-82). What this shows, I think, is that Dummett's semanticization of the realism/antirealism debate leads to an impoverishment of the philosophical vocabulary, and in particular of the concept of realism. The reason why idealism can flaunt itself in the colors of its traditional rival is that realism has been eviscerated and can't put up a fight. It is notable that Platts, whose moral realism Lovibond claims to be developing, does not go along with this. For him, realism is verification transcendence *plus* 'the independent existence of objects'.

Having embraced *con amore* Lakatos' malicious caricature of Wittgenstein as an authoritarian idealist Lovibond is faced with two problems:

(1) Because moral rationality and truth are internal to language-games, conservatives such as Bradley, Levy-Bruhl and (though Lovibond doesn't mention him) Durkheim, have argued that rebels against the prevailing moral paradigm, 'star-gazing virgins with souls above their spheres', commit intellectual as well as social suicide. Lovibond, whose writing is pervaded by a certain *New Left Review* goodthinkfulness, is perturbed by this. In abandoning non-cognitivism together with the liberal tradition she does not want to discard 'the habit of respect' for 'conscientious dissent'. (Irresponsible, self-interested or frivolous dissent can presumably be squashed.) She must preserve the possibility of star-gazing virgins.

(2) What was wrong with non-cognitivism was a dichotomy between the inner and the outer perspectives. From the inside, we seem to read off morality from the world, not impose our valuations on it. This dichotomy reasserts itself within the Wittgensteinian picture. Again, from the inside, moral truth does not seem to be a matter of matching consensual standards as 'philosophy' represents it.

Lovibond wrestles with (1) for over 100 pages. Bradley and his ilk are guilty of a 'fetishistic distortion' in that they ignore the extent to which we are *accomplices* in the continued existence of the language-game. Since 'acting lies at [its] bottom' we can always decide *not* to act in the right way, and this choice has a moral dimension. This last is on her own showing incoherent. If morality is internal to the language-game then the choice of whether to participate cannot be guided by moral criteria, since such criteria only exist for participants. (Any weakening on this score would invalidate the bullying of sceptical initiates.) Moral consensus can (she says) be coherently challenged, first, because there is a certain amount of give in the system, and secondly because we can *gamble* on our deviant view becoming the consensual one. Changes in language-games can occur, and someone must be the first to suggest them. If vindicated by events, he will be deemed to have spoken truly, indeed *will have* spoken truly in the context of the revamped consensus. If the gamble does not pay off, however, he will not only have failed to enunciate truths, but maybe to make sense. Dissent is predicated on the possibility of a successful historicist coup. Might in the long run is right. Her dogmatism is not, as she claims, 'benign' nor can she escape the consequences of her own authoritarianism.

As for (2), Lovibond admits the dichotomy but says it does not matter, since on her conception it is not localized within ethics but applies globally to *all* forms of discourse. In science too we seem to be talking about an independent reality (since truth does not *mean* consensus) rather than making it up in the course of our linguistic activities. But a global difficulty does not cease to be a difficulty. The fact that Lovibond's 'philosophical' understanding of science, and other subjects, is at odds with that of the practitioners goes to show that it is false, not that her understanding of ethics is acceptable.

Towards the end of the book Lovibond seems to repent of her relativism and historicism. As befits a left Hegelian she yearns for a Truly Human morality, one that reflects our condition as embodied beings. Since *any* existing form of life is consistent with that condition it is difficult to see how *one* could be a consequence thereof. Lovibond is nervous of the charge of vacuity and

retorts that Iris Murdoch's intuitionism is equally vacuous. This is both irrelevant and false. But vacuous as Lovibond's vision is, it is not innocuous. She endorses Gramsci's ideal of a culturally unified world, and, since this cultural unity would be grounded in language-games backed by sanctions and insusceptible to further turns of the dialectical screw, it has an unpleasantly totalitarian ring.

My final criticisms will be by way of a commentary on McDowell's blurb. 'A first rate discussion of the shortcomings of the currently dominant empiricist tradition in moral philosophy-' On the contrary, her critique consists in caricature. Her 'empiricism' is a hodge-podge of doctrines which nobody-with the possible exception of R. M. Hare - now believes. Her model empiricist is Hobbes! Her criticisms when not directed against strawmen or the dead will not convince those not already given over to the Wittgensteinian world-view. '- and the attractions of a radical alternative' This is precisely the problem. Rather than stating *theses* and advancing *arguments* she discusses '*conceptions*' and delineates their '*attractions*'. Again, the model is Dummett who advocates verificationism and intuitionism through four voluminous tomes without ever owning up to either. The result is that though her sentences and even her paragraphs are 'elegant and lucid' (McDowell) the drift of her thought is not. Worse, when a weak argument is advanced it is usually qualified by some such phrase as 'a Wittgensteinian must say. . .'. Is the argument supposed to be valid - or more neutrally *just* what a Wittgensteinian must say? *Probably* the former since Wittgenstein is treated in Biblical style. His dicta, even the silliest, are texts to be expounded, not propositions to be examined. But both her interpretation and the *truth* of her interpretation require *argument*. (Did the Wittgenstein of 'I'll teach you differences' *really* dissolve all indicatives in a homogenous semantic soup?) Piety is not enough. 'The writing [has] a remarkable breadth of reference'. Rather, it is the writing of a parochial Oxonian spiced with a few exotics. I suppose what impresses McDowell are the references to Marx, Engels and Nietzsche who are converted into proto-Wittgensteins or, more properly, proto-Lovibonds. This is particularly absurd in the case of Nietzsche whose meta-ethic resembles not Lovibond's but Mackie's. What knowledge she has of philosophy of science is camouflaged by some exceedingly silly remarks, and there is no attempt to engage with critics of moral historicism such as Popper. Nor is there any mention of her 18th century precursors in the criticism of empiricist morals.

Nevertheless, the book is a reasonably candid presentation of a view which is very much in the air. As such it is worth buying, but not at its present exorbitant price. Wait till it comes out in paperback.

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